

If Congress can afford corporate tax cuts, it can afford children's health care

Both parties say they support the Children's Health Insurance Program. So why isn't it funded?

From the Editors in the [January 3, 2018](#) issue



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For 20 years, the Children's Health Insurance Program has helped states subsidize health coverage for children from low-income families. But this fall, Congress allowed CHIP's funding to expire. On November 30, on the eve of the Senate's

approval of a massive corporate tax cut projected to cost the government a net \$1 trillion over ten years, Senator Orrin Hatch addressed the issue on the Senate floor. “The reason CHIP’s having trouble,” said the Utah Republican, “is because we don’t have money anymore.”

Republicans have long argued that spending on social programs is irresponsible given the pressing need to reduce the deficit—a pressing need they tend to forget when what’s on the table instead is tax cuts for businesses and high-income earners. Veteran legislators can perform this script in their sleep. So it was startling to hear Hatch, a seven-term senator, flub a line so badly. For GOP lawmakers, “We don’t have the money” is a line you trot out when you’re fighting a Democratic majority and its spending proposals, not when you’re about to explode the deficit yourself with a tax cut that is essentially a lavish donor-appreciation gift. It’s hard enough to defend such a giveaway without the juxtaposition of turning your back on low-income kids who can’t see a doctor because the government allegedly can’t afford it.

Created in 1997, CHIP serves working families with incomes not quite low enough to qualify for Medicaid, covering only their children. The funding takes the form of a \$14 billion annual block grant for states to manage—not a federal entitlement program that might grow more expensive on its own. Families pay a share of the premiums as well. Well designed and modest in scope, CHIP has long enjoyed bipartisan support.

Hatch insists that he cares deeply about CHIP. He cosponsored the original bill that created the program, along with current legislation to reauthorize it. Other GOP lawmakers support CHIP as well. The House passed a reauthorization measure—bundled with cuts to other health-care programs. Funding for CHIP is being held up less by debates over the program’s merits than by disagreements about what other provisions to tie it to, and how to pay for it.

Of course, if CHIP funding were a priority for Republicans, Congress would simply pass it—the way both houses passed their tax bills. But while tax cuts for the rich apparently reflect the party’s highest purpose, children’s health care is a mere bargaining chip. So until Congress can act on a program both parties say they support, states will be left to borrow money from other budget lines to support CHIP—or send out cancellation notices to families.

There is an honest debate that exists around taxes and spending, with good points on various sides. This tax bill exists outside that debate; it contains no party's best ideas. Meanwhile, one of the most significant bipartisan accomplishments of the last several decades is languishing—leaving American children at risk.

A version of this article appears in the January 3 print edition under the title "A gift for corporations, nothing for children."